

TIMELINESS OF CLAIMS PROCESSING FROM THE VETERANS' VIEWPOINT:

**What are Their Expectations and Experience and How
Does it Relate to Organizational Goals?**



**Surveys and Research Staff
Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity
Veterans Benefits Administration**

**Prepared by Ronda Britt
November 2002**

Introduction

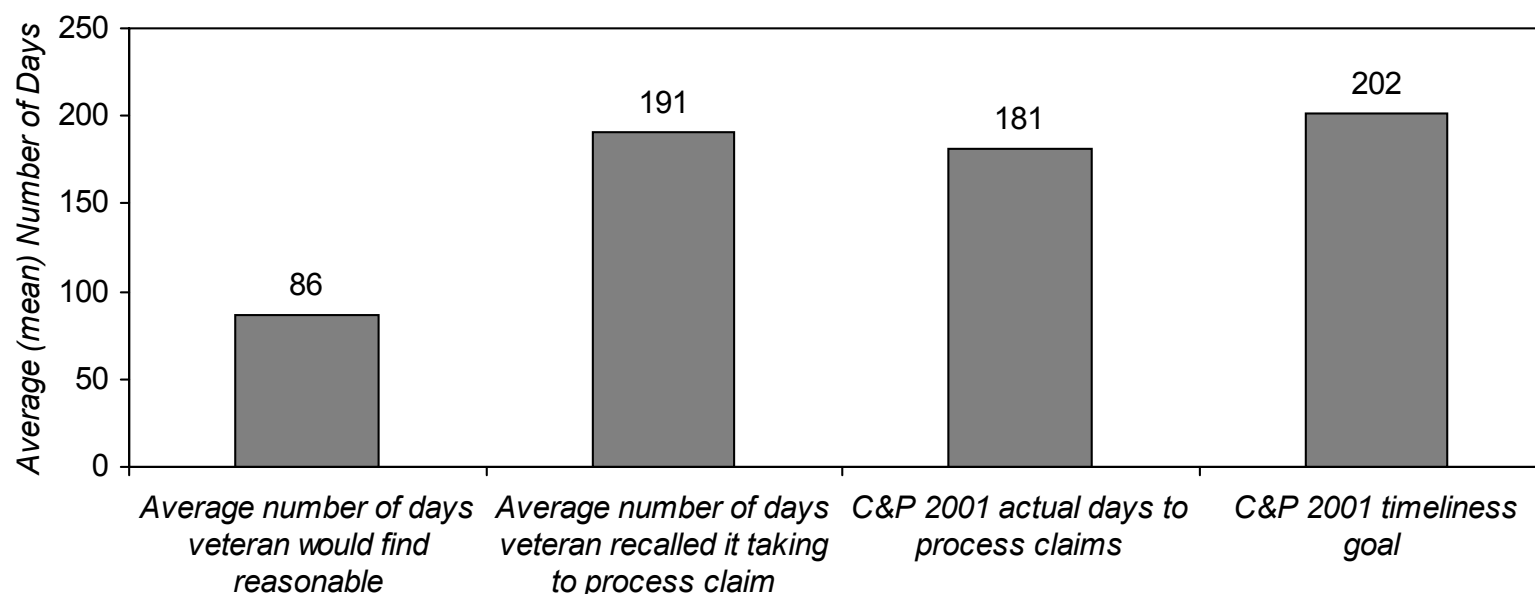
Data from the 2001 *Survey of Veterans' Satisfaction With the VA Compensation and Pension (C&P) Claims Process* provide a wealth of information on the expectations veterans have regarding claim processing time. In addition to asking survey respondents to rate the **actual** timeliness of service provided throughout the entire claim process, we also ask them at the beginning of the questionnaire to choose what the **ideal** time frame would be for processing their claim, as a way of measuring the expectations they have going into the process. Later in the questionnaire we ask them how long it actually took to get a decision and to rate how reasonable that amount of time was, which measures how well the service delivered met their expectations.

This report begins by showing the difference between what veterans consider a reasonable amount of time to process their claim and what VBA's actual average time was in 2001, as well as VBA's timeliness goal. It also shows the differences in how much time veterans consider reasonable by the type of claim being processed. The report then examines how veterans rated the actual time it took to process their claim and how this relates to their earlier expectations. Finally, we examine how these expectations of timeliness influence veterans' overall satisfaction with the claim process, and how providing a realistic estimate of claims processing time may mitigate dissatisfaction with the process.

In short, this is a report about claims processing timeliness primarily from the viewpoint of the veteran, and it provides a critically important perspective from the people to whom VBA's timeliness matters most.

How Long do Veterans Think is Reasonable to Process Their Claim?

Average Number of Days Veteran Would Find Reasonable vs. Actual Time and C&P Timeliness Goal

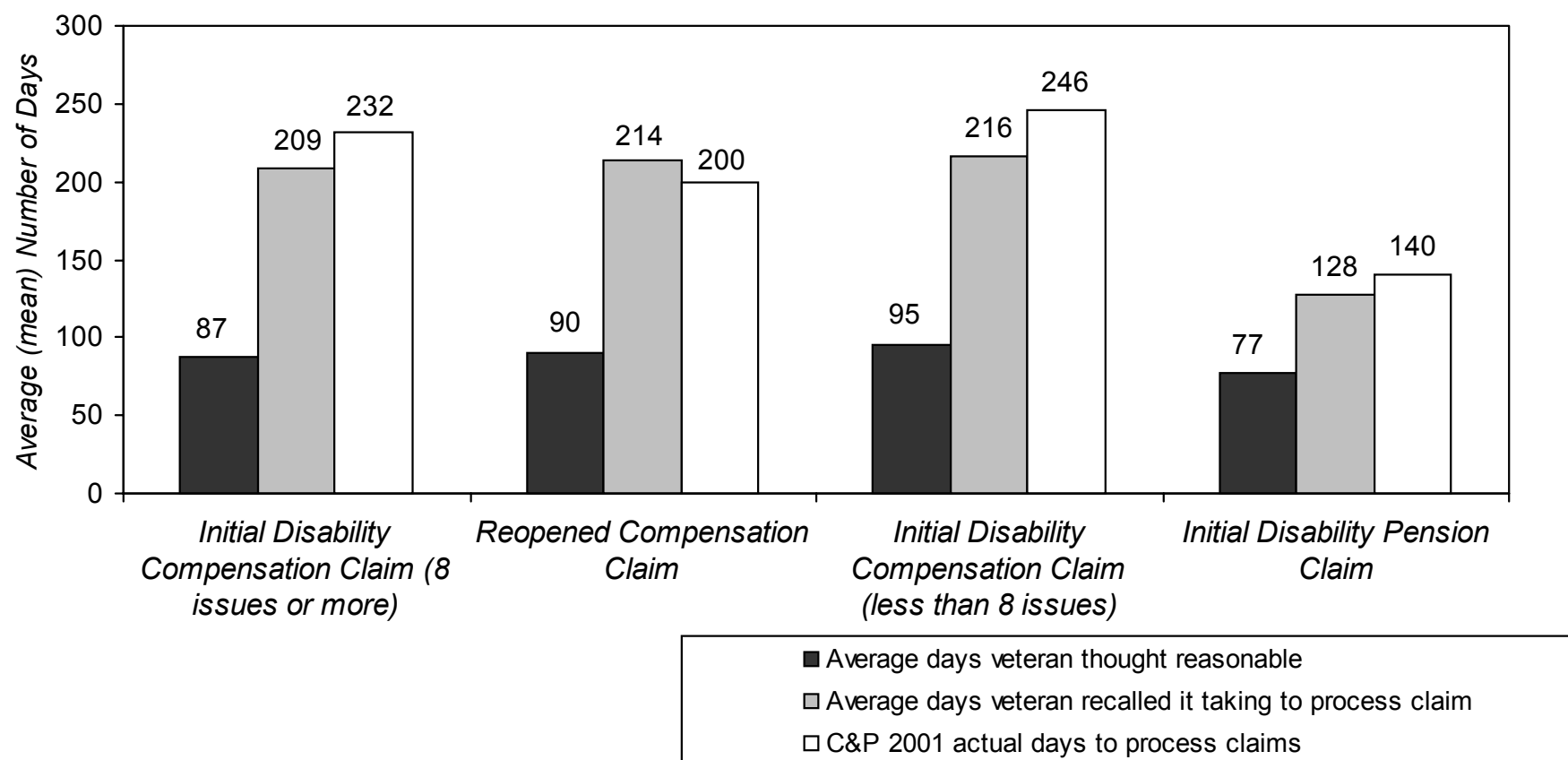


This chart provides an interesting first look at what survey respondents viewed as a reasonable amount of time to process a claim, independent of how long it actually took. It is clear that in purely hypothetical terms, veterans want their claims decided in under half the time it currently takes, or 86 days as opposed to 181 days. However, this does not mean that everyone whose claim takes over 3 months to decide is dissatisfied with the **overall** claim process, it is merely an indicator of their dissatisfaction with the **timeliness** of the process.

NOTE: To accurately compare the C&P survey measures (which ask veterans what they consider a reasonable amount of time to wait for a claim decision and also how long they recalled it taking) to the C&P 2001 measure of average days and the C&P timeliness goal, we weighted the survey measures to include the same end products (EPs) in the same proportions that comprise the C&P measures*. (See technical note, page 12)

How Long do Veterans Think is Reasonable to Process Their Claim?

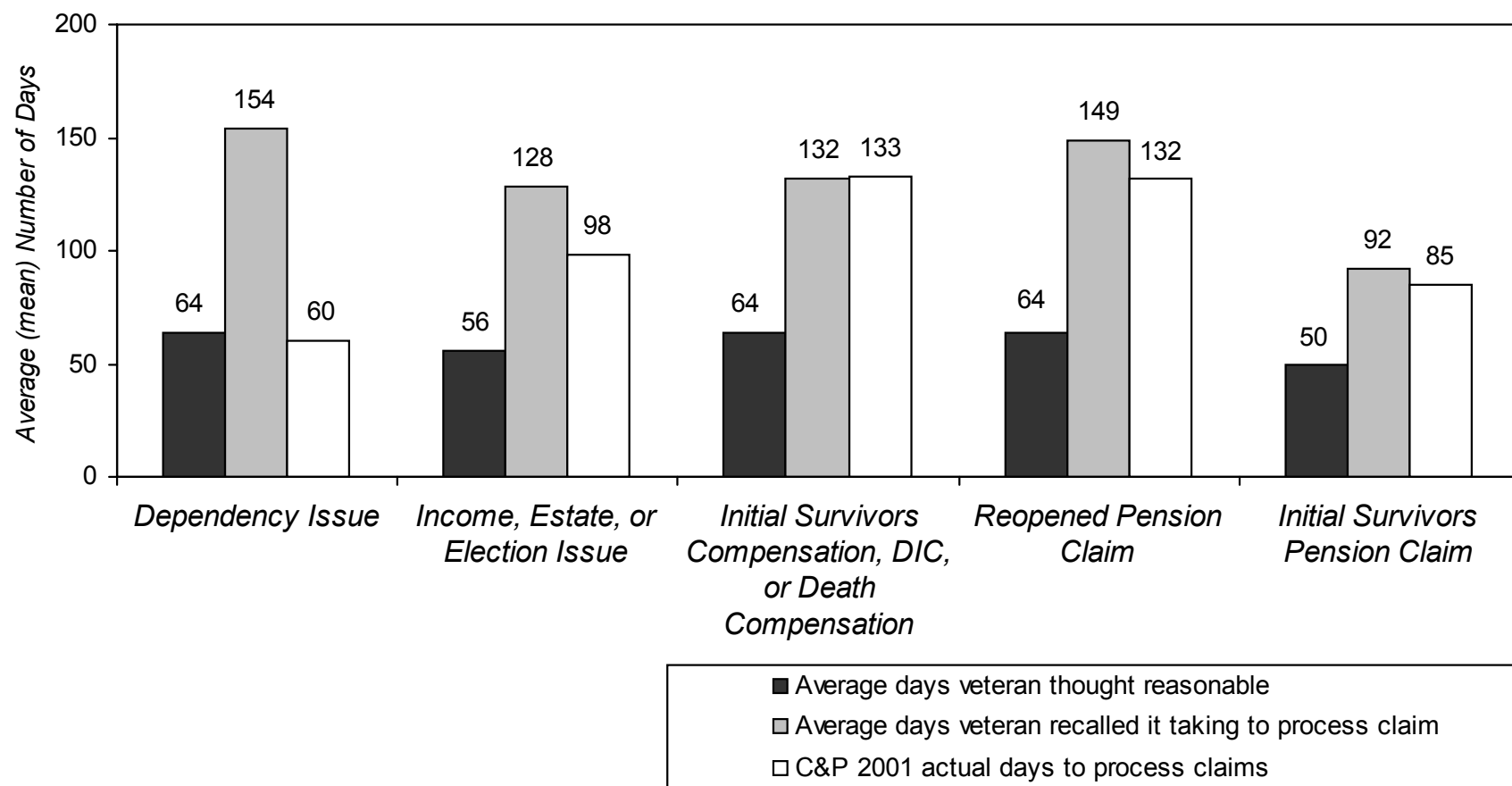
Comparison of Veteran Reasonable Time, Veteran Recalled Time, and VBA Actual Time, by End Product (Part I)



This chart and the chart on the following page give a more detailed view of veterans' expectations and experiences within specific end products. For those with the first three claim types listed above, which are also the most complex, the average amount of time veteran survey respondents thought was reasonable was approximately three months. Those with initial disability pension claims wanted a slightly shorter claim process of roughly 10 weeks. For each of these types, the actual time to process the claim was double the amount of time the veterans viewed as reasonable. It is also interesting to note how accurately the veterans were able to recall the actual time it took to process these types of claims.

How Long do Veterans Think is Reasonable to Process Their Claim?

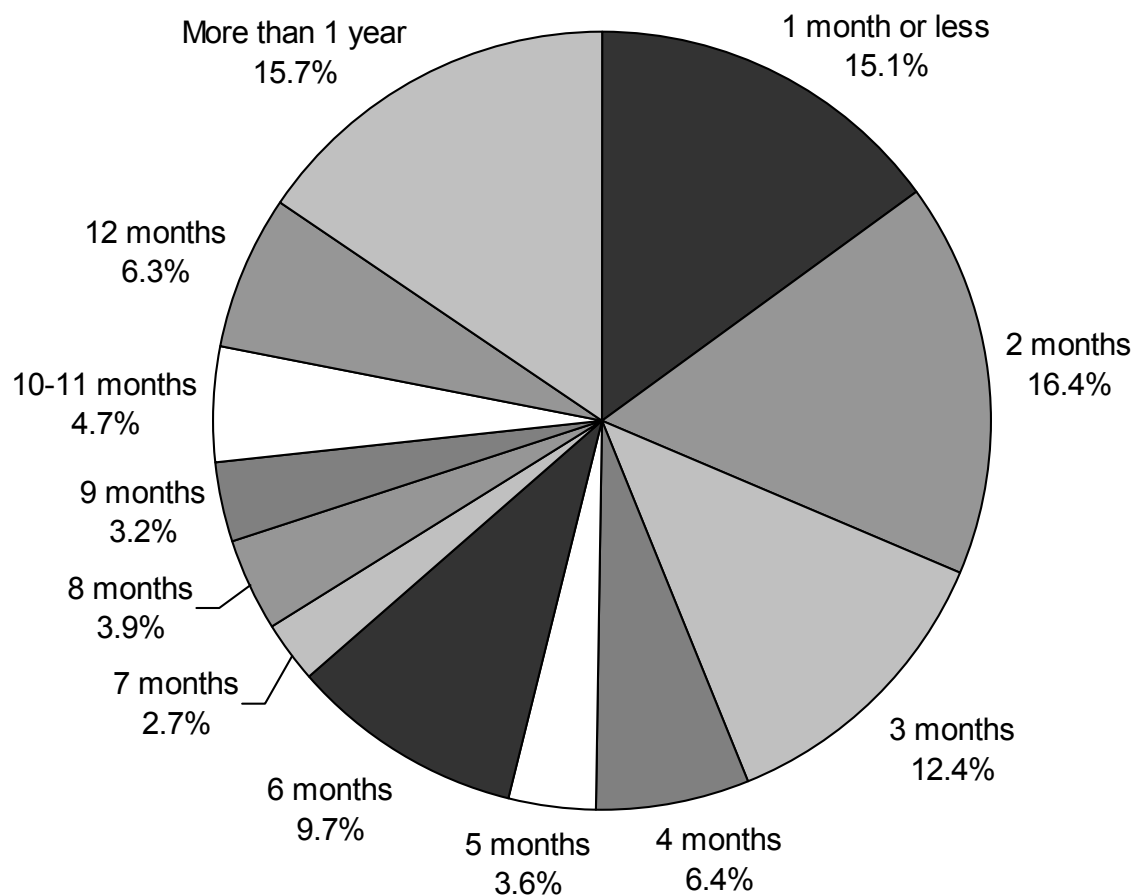
Comparison of Veteran Reasonable Time, Veteran Recalled Time, and VBA Actual Time, by End Product (Part II)



It is clear when comparing this chart to the previous chart that veterans are able to recognize some types of claims as more complex than others and judge a reasonable amount of time accordingly. For the less complex claim types listed in this chart, approximately two months or less was considered a reasonable time frame to complete the claim. Once again, the veterans and spouses were fairly accurate in recollecting the amount of time it took to process their claims, except for those with dependency issue claims. The amount of time they recall it taking to process their claim is over twice what the C&P actual time was, which may mean they are confusing this type of claim as an extension of their initial disability claim.

Did Veterans Find VBA's Actual Processing Time Reasonable?

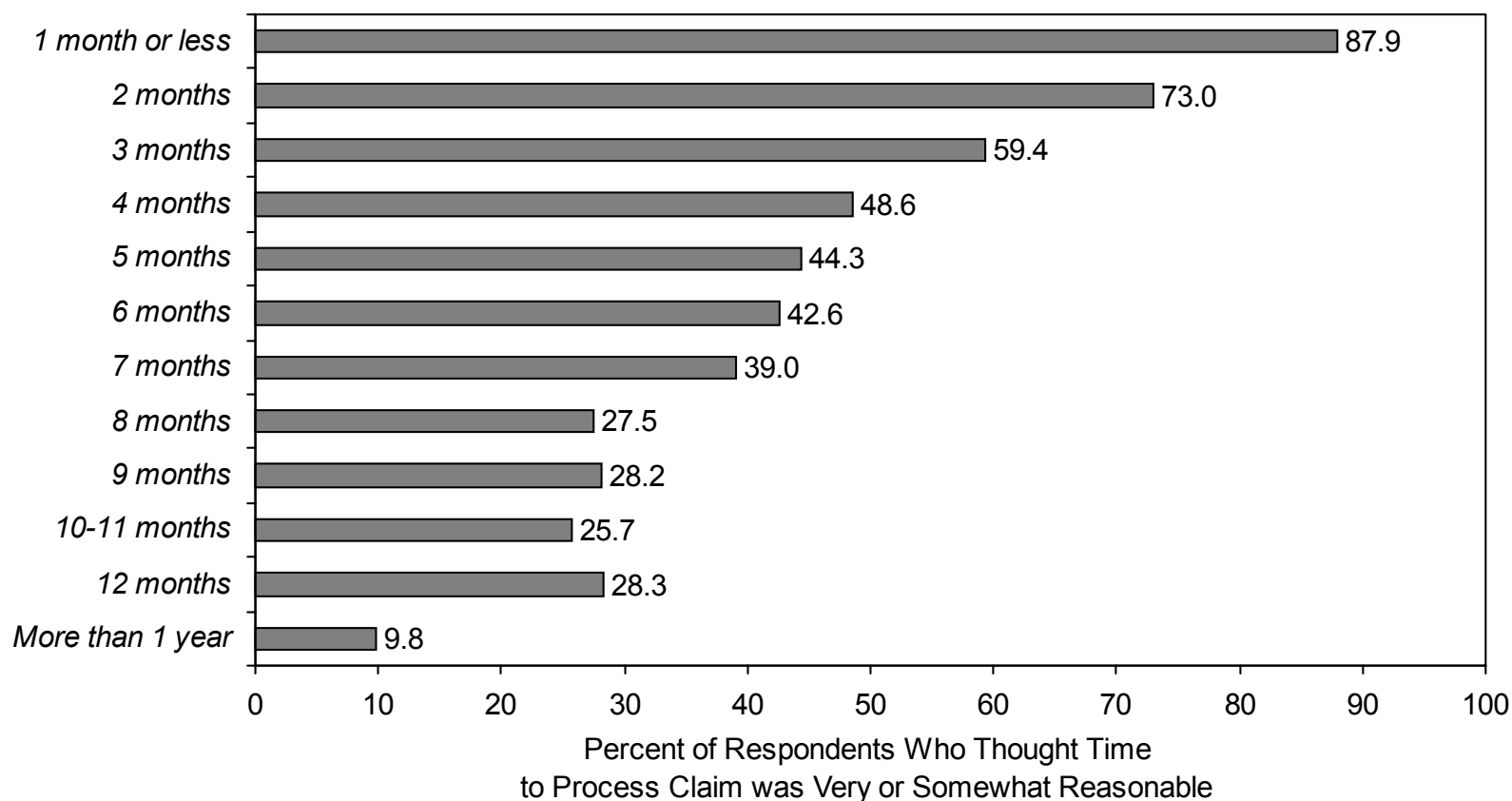
Veterans' Recollections of Claim Processing Time



This chart and those following show survey data for all of the end products listed in the previous two charts combined and based on the actual C&P workload distribution for those end products in 2001. (See technical note, page 12) Less than half (43.9 percent) of all respondents with completed claims had their claims processed in 3 months or less, and over one-fifth of respondents (22 percent) waited a year or more for their claim to be decided.

Did Veterans Find VBA's Actual Processing Time Reasonable?

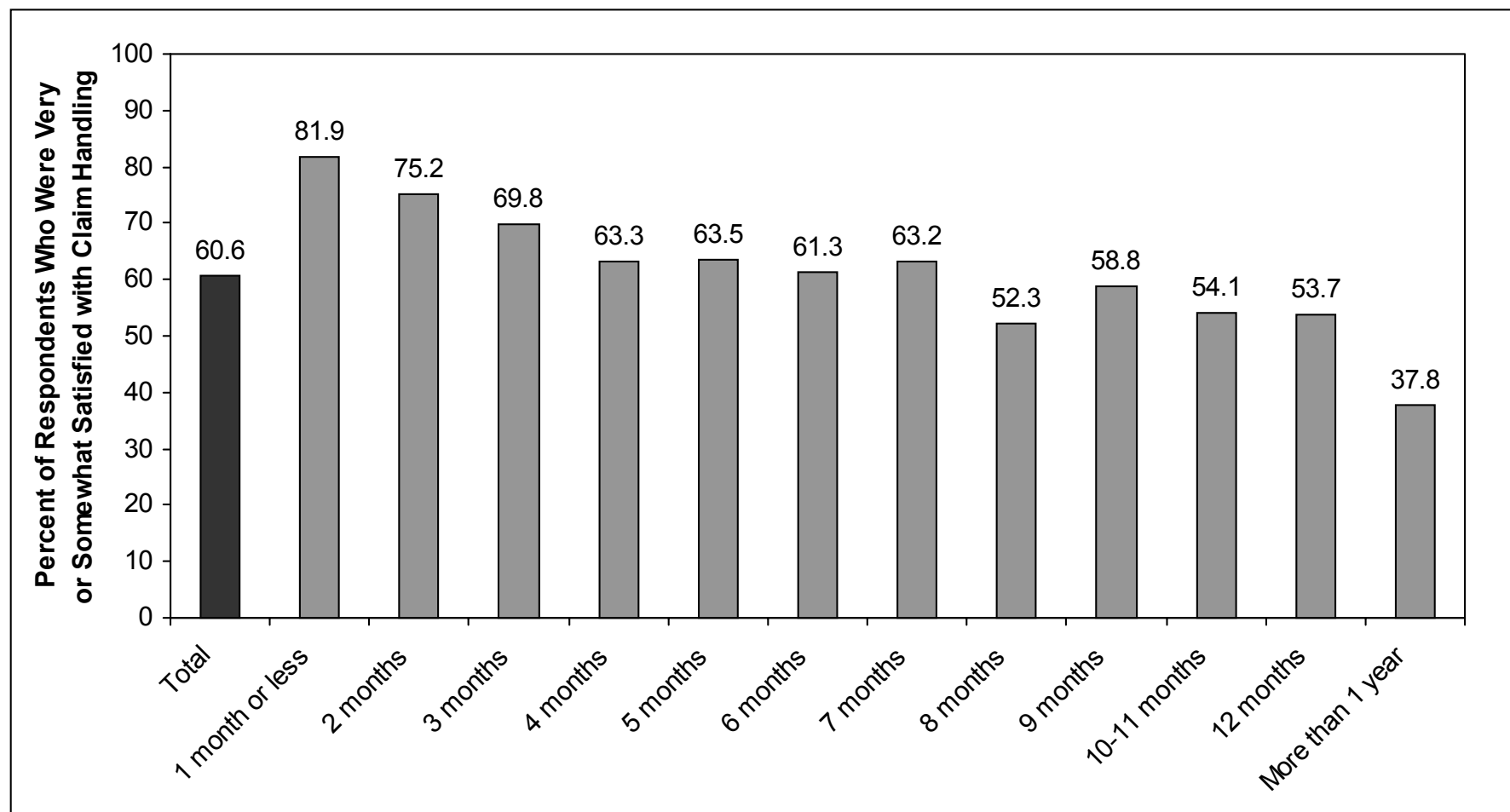
Veteran's Recollection of Claim Processing Time by Whether Time was Reasonable in Veteran's View



When asked to rate the actual time it took to decide their claim, the majority of respondents who had their claims decided within 3 months thought the timeframe was very or somewhat reasonable. After 3 months, those who felt the time was reasonable steadily declined to around one-fourth of respondents whose claims took 8 to 12 months to process and only 9.8 percent of those who waited over a year for their claim decision.

How Does the Veteran's View of Timeliness Impact Overall Satisfaction?

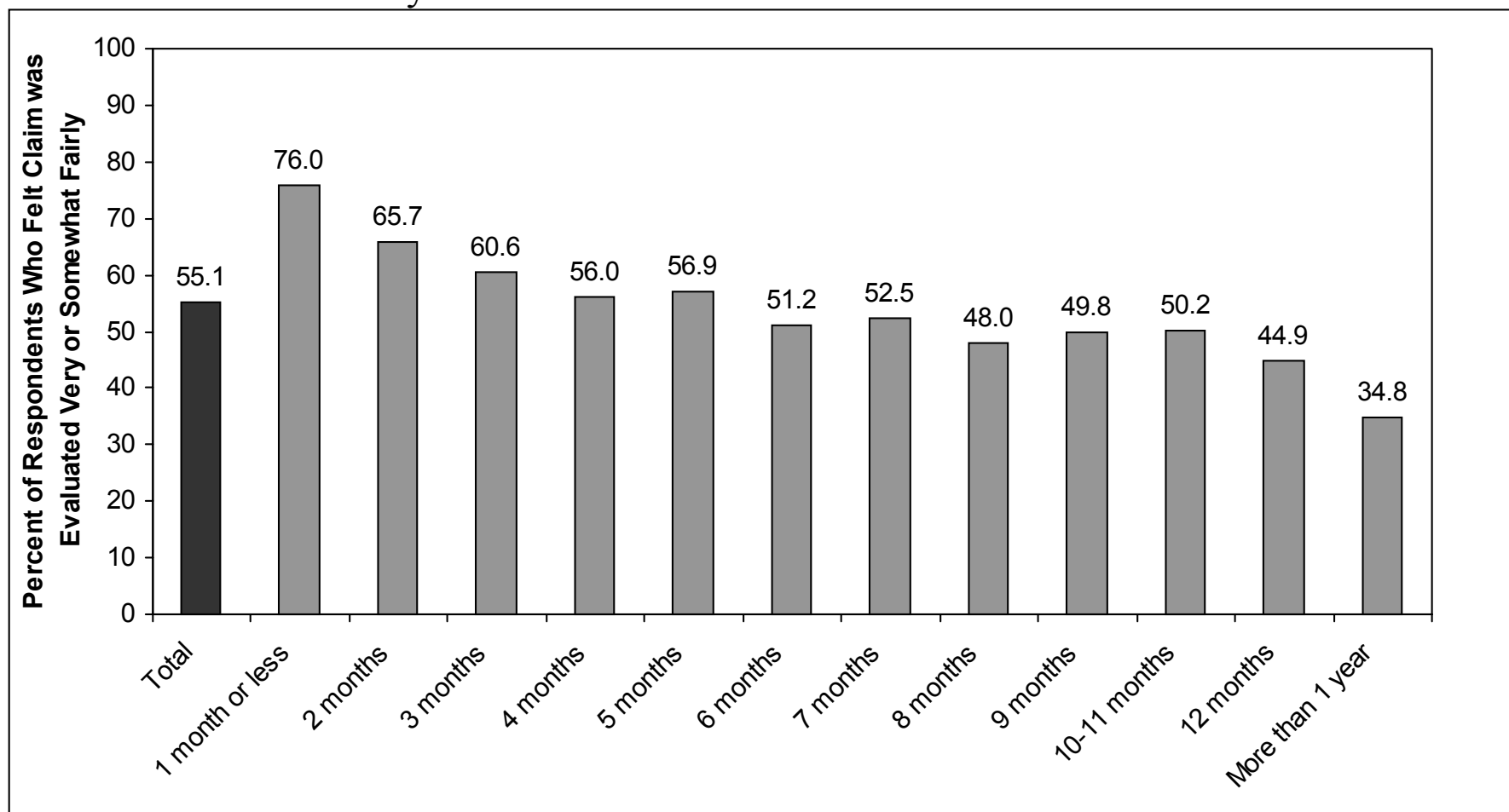
Overall Satisfaction with Claim Handling by Veteran's Recollection of Claim Processing Time



Generally, the longer veterans recall it taking VBA to decide their claim, the less satisfied they were with the overall claim handling. This was found to be independent of whether the claim was granted or denied, as the proportions of granted and denied claims are consistent across all timeframes. Having the claim decided in under 3 months gives the greatest boost to overall satisfaction, but taking longer than 7 months has a negative impact on overall satisfaction. The satisfaction levels of those whose claims took over 7 months to complete are all below the national average for those with completed claims (60.6 percent).

How Does the Veteran's View of Timeliness Impact Overall Satisfaction?

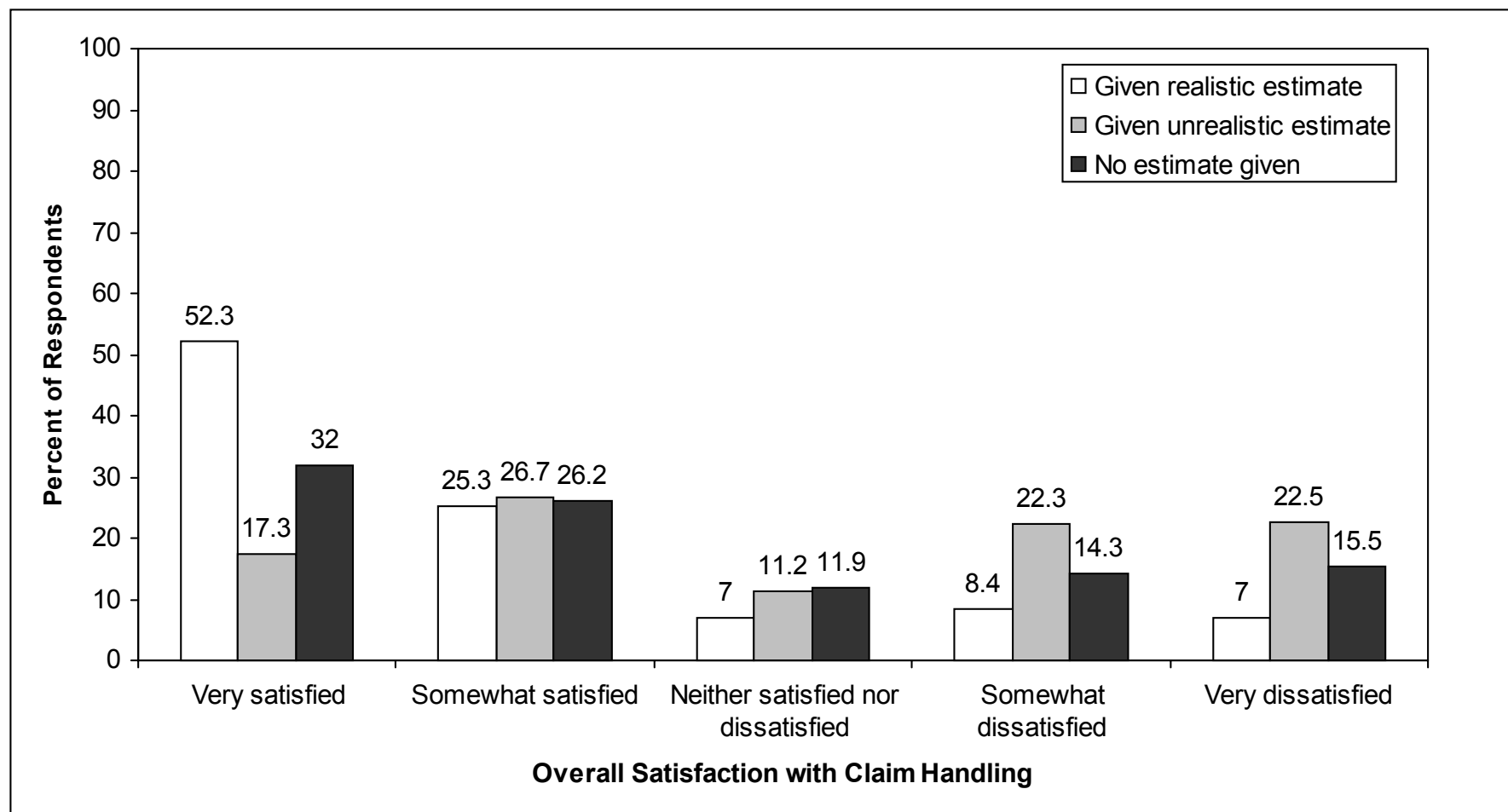
Veteran's Recollection of Claim Processing Time by Whether Veteran Felt Claim was Evaluated Fairly



There also is a negative relationship between claim processing time and perceived fairness. This chart shows that the longer veterans recalled it taking to process their claim, the less likely they were to feel their claim was evaluated very or somewhat fairly. All of those veterans who recalled that their claim took 6 months or longer to process rated the “fairness” of the evaluation below the national average.

How Does the Veteran's View of Timeliness Impact Overall Satisfaction?

Overall Satisfaction with Claim Handling by Whether VBA Estimate was Realistic or Not



Regardless of the actual length of time a veteran had to wait for a claim decision, being given a realistic estimate up front of the timeframe to process a claim has a big impact on a veteran's overall satisfaction with the way their claim was handled. For those who were given a realistic estimate, 52.3 percent were **very** satisfied with claim handling, compared to only 17.3 percent of those who felt they were not given a realistic estimate.

Conclusion

It appears that veterans have high expectations for VBA timeliness, which is understandable considering their experience with other private sector entities such as insurance companies or loan institutions which are capable of processing complex cases in a short period of time. However, they also have a good understanding of the relative complexity of the different types of claims being processed by VBA, which is demonstrated by the differences in the average times they find reasonable when separated out by type of claim.

Their expectations also do not change much by the end of the claim process, when the majority of respondents viewed anything less than 3 months as very or somewhat reasonable. Yet while these high expectations have an impact on overall satisfaction with the claim process for both granted and denied claimants, timeliness is only one of many factors which influence a veteran's overall satisfaction. In fact, veterans still rate their overall satisfaction and the perceived fairness of the claim process at or above the national average until they reach the 6-7 month timeframe. Also, one aspect of the process which seems to have a dramatic impact on overall satisfaction is simply being given a realistic estimate of the time it will take to decide the claim at the beginning of the process. Therefore, while it may be currently impossible to reach a goal of 3 months to process all claims in order to meet veterans' expectations, VBA can work to increase satisfaction with timeliness by being as straightforward as possible about the length of time it will take when a claim is submitted.

Technical Note on End Product Distribution of Sample

The chart below shows the different EP mixes that were used in this report. For the chart on page 3, we weighted the survey data by the EP distribution that comprises the C&P 2001 performance measure. Two of the EPs (future exams reviews and hospital reviews) were not represented in our survey, therefore we substituted actual VBA recorded days* for these two in place of an average number of days veterans found reasonable or recalled. Since these two EPs represented only 6.1 percent of the total 2001 rating-related actions, this substitution did not significantly alter the survey measures.

For the remainder of the report, the EP distribution of the C&P survey sample was used.

End Product	Percent in 2001 C&P Survey sample	Percent in 2001 C&P Performance Measure score
Initial Disability Compensation Claim	2.5	17.9
Reopened Compensation Claim	31.6	54.3
Reopened Pension Claim	7.0	11.3
Dependent Issue	23.7	N/A
Initial Survivors Compensation, DIC, or Death Compensation	2.5	4.1
Income, Estate, or Election Issue	15.9	N/A
Initial Disability Pension Claim	3.7	6.0
Initial Survivors Pension Claim	4.4	N/A
Reviews, future exams	N/A	4.6
Reviews, hospitals	N/A	1.5

* Found on page 133 of Dept. of Veterans Affairs Annual Performance Report FY 2001.